

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L CAIRO 2198

LIMDIS

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS PFOR LE SY EG

SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN CROSS CURRENTS IN LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 1486

1. APPRECIATE BEIRUT CONCERNS AS EXPRESSED REFTEL. WHILE WE REGRET GOE CARPING ABOUT FRAGILE CEASEFIRE IN LEBANON, WE MUST RECOGNIZE THAT LEBANON IS A COUNTER IN CURRENT BITTER EGYPTIAN-SYRIAN ANIMOSITY PROMPTED BY SYRIAN ATTACKS ON SINAI II AND SADAT. CHRONOLOGY OF MUTUAL PRESS ATTACKS IS CLEAR. IT WAS SYRIANS, NOT EGYPTIANS WHO BEGAN THEM. UNFORTUNATELY, ONCE BEGUN, EGYPTIANS HAVE RESPONDED IN KIND AND THE FRATICIDAL WAR OF WORDS HAS ESCALATED.

2. PARADOXICALLY, SINAI II IS AT ONCE SADAT'S SUCCESS AND SOURCE OF MAJOR FRUSTRATION. THROUGH IT, HE HAS OBTAINED THE RETURN OF MODEST TERRITORIES AND LIMITED
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ISRAELI WITHDRAWALS. SAME TIME, SINAI II HAS APPRECIABLY

DEGRADED EGYPT'S POLITICAL INFLUENCE IN ARAB WORLD. IN ASTUTE FASHION, SYRIANS HAVE MADE POLITICAL CAPITAL BY POSING AS CHAMPIONS OF PALESTINIANS. THEY HAVE HAD SOME SUCCESS. PREDICTABLY, EGYPTIANS, WHO HAVE LONG REGARDED THEMSELVES AS PREEMINENT IN ARAB WORLD, FIND THIS DIFFICULT TO STOMACH.

3. EGYPTIANS ARE SCHIZOPHRENIC ON LEBANON. THEY, NO LESS THAN OTHER ARABS, DO NOT WANT THE ANARCHIC CONDITIONS OF THE LAST FEW MONTHS TO RESUME. SAME TIME, UNABLE TO CONSTRUCTIVELY INFLUENCE SITUATION THEMSELVES, THEY RESENT DEMONSTRATED SYRIAN CAPABILITY TO DO SO. THEY LIKEWISE RESENT WHAT THEY CONSIDER SYRIAN EXPLOITATION OF LEBANESE DISTRESS TO MAKE GRAB FOR PLO LEADERSHIP. BUT FACT REMAINS THAT APART FROM THEIR PRESS ATTACKS ON SYRIA, WHICH MAY INDEED GIVE COMFORT TO THOSE LEBANESE ELEMENTS WHO OPPOSE SYRIAN-IMPOSED SETTLEMENT, EGYPTIANS HAVE FEW REMAINING DIRECT ASSETS IN LEBANON TO OBSTRUCT SETTLEMENT. SUCH ASSETS AS THEY HAD UNDER NASSER WERE DISMANTLED BY SADAT, WHO IS RECEIVING SOME MUTED PUBLIC CRITICISM FOR THIS. IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE THAT ANY EGYPTIAN RHETORIC DIRECTED AGAINST SYRIANS WILL APPRECIABLY DIMINISH LATTER'S ABILITY TO MAKE SETTLEMENT STICK. SHOULD THIS ESTIMATE BE WRONG, THE BEST WAY TO STOP EGYPTIAN PRESS ATTACKS ON SYRIA WOULD BE IF SYRIA STOPS ITS ATTACKS ON EGYPT AND SINAI II. THIS MAY BE A CHICKEN AND EGG AFFAIR, BUT WE SHOULD NOT DELUDE OURSELVES THAT EGYPT WILL CURB ITS PRESS ATTACKS SO LONG AS THOSE OF DAMASCUS CONTINUE.

4. WE RECOMMEND AGAINST ANY USG INITIATIVE TO URGE GOE TO STOP ITS PRESS ATTACKS ON SYRIA. WE ARE ALREADY SUSPECTED HERE OF HAVING A QUOTE LOVE AFFAIR UNQUOTE WITH ASAD. EGYPTIANS, IN TYPICAL ARAB FASHION, ARE LOOKING FOR REAL OR IMAGINED EVIDENCE WHICH WOULD SUPPORT THEIR CONCERN. IN GENERAL, WE SHOULD ALSO AVOID POONTIFICATING TO EGYPTIANS OR OTHER ARABS ABOUT WHAT THEIR INTERESTS REALLY ARE. EGYPTIANS ARE CAPABLE OF MAKING THAT JUDGMENT THEMSELVES AND IT IS NOT NECESSARILY VIEWED AS IDENTICAL TO OUR OWN. CONCEIVABLY, AN APPROACH TO THE SAUDIS, WHO ARE CONCERNED ABOUT EGYPTIAN-SYRIAN STRAINS MIGHTS BE USEFUL. HOWEVER, IF WE DECIDE TO DO SO, WE SHOULD RECKON WITH WORD

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OF THIS GETTING BACK TO THE EGYPTIANS AND BEING DEEPLY RESENTED BY THEM.

5. USG INTEREST WOULD OBVIOUSLY BE SERVED BY CESSATION OF SYRIAN-EGYPTIAN PROPAGANDA WARFARE. IT WOULD PRESUMABLY ALSO HELP LEBANESE SETTLEMENT, ALTHOUGH LEBANESE HAVE FOR LONG SHOWN THEIR OWN ORGANIC ABILITY KEEP POT BOILING. IF SYRIANS COULD BE PERSUADED TONE DOWN ATTACKS ON EGYPT

AND SINAI, CAIRO WOULD PROBABLY RECIPROCATÉ.
SAUDI DEMARCHES TO BOTH DAMASCUS AND CAIRO TO REDUCE TENSIONS
MIGHT BE HELPFUL, BUT IF SAUDI AMB IS RIGHT EVEN SAUDIS
ARE LEERY OF INVOLVING THEMSELVES TOO ACTIVELY IN THIS FRAY.
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